

Message Text

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PAGE 01 FREETO 00869 111453Z

ACTION AF-08

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FM AMEMBASSY FREETOWN

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5007

S E C R E T FREETOWN 0869

EO 11652: XGDS-1,2

TAGS: PINS PINT SL

SUBJ: UNREST IN SIERRA LEONE: A ROUND-UP REPORT

REF: (A) STATE 51312, (B) FREETOWN A-17 DATED MARCH 4, 1977

1. RECOGNIZING THAT THE DEPARTMENT AND OTHER INTERESTED AGENCIES WOULD WANT A COMPREHENSIVE REPORT ON THE PRESENT SITUATION IN SIERRA LEONE, THE EMBASSY PREPARED AN ANALYSIS ENTITLED "SIERRA LEONE TWO MONTHS BEFORE ELECTIONS" (REFAIR), WHICH WAS DISPATCHED TO DEPARTMENT BY SPECIAL COURIER ON MARCH 9. THIS REPORT SHOULD FULFILL REQUIREMENTS OF PARA ONE REFTEL. WEEKLY UPDATES OF SITUATION WILL BE PROVIDED. COMMENTS BELOW RELATE TO QUESTIONS REF A TO EXTENT THEY ARE NOT COVERED IN REF B.

2. EMBASSY HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO UNCOVER PRECISE NUMBER OF PEOPLE KILLED AND INJURED IN THE DISTURBANCES, AND ALTHOUGH SENIOR GOSL OFFICIALS PROBABLY HAVE KNOWLEDGE THE NUMBER KILLED, DOUBT ANYONE ELSE DOES. BOTH FIGURES CITED PARA 2A REFTEL ARE FAR HIGHER THAN ANY ESTIMATE WE WOULD GIVE AND CANNOT BE SUPPORTED BY ANY EVIDENCE AVAILABLE TO POST. IN ANALYZING SUCH FIGURES DEPARTMENT SHOULD NOTE THAT POLICE, EXCEPT FOR ESTIMATED 150 RIOT POLICE ARMED WITH OLD RIFLES, ARE UNARMED. INTERNAL SECURITY UNIT, WHICH IS ARMED WITH SUB-MACHINE GUNS, USUALLY IS NOT ON SCENE WHEN RIOTS OR DISTURBANCES ERUPT. BY THE TIME THEY ARRIVE DEMONSTRATORS HAVE LONG SINCE DISPERSED. AS RE-
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 FREETO 00869 111453Z

PORTED IN FREETOWN 530, THE NUMBER KILLED IN FREETOWN RIOTING RANGED FROM 8 TO 50, WITH ABOUT 20 A GOOD GUESS NOW. WE KNOW OF TWO KILLED IN BO, BUT NOT BY POLICE. THERE, A PROMINENT APC SUPPORTER FIRED ON DEMONSTRATORS STONING HIS HOUSE. WE HAVE NO REPORTS OF DEATHS ATTRIBUTABLE TO POLICE ACTION ELSEWHERE.

3. THE ESTIMATE OF 200 STUDENTS ARRESTED ALSO SEEMS EXAGGERATED,

ALTHOUGH THAT NUMBER COULD HAVE BEEN DETAINED BRIEFLY. WE WOULD NOTE THAT IN MANY OF THESE CASES, AND IN THOSE IN THE NEXT PARAGRAPH, "DETAINED" IS A BETTER WORD THAN ARRESTED. TEMPORARY DETENTION HAS BEEN A FREQUENTLY USED TACTICAL PLOY IN SIERRA LEONE POLITICS. THE STUDENT SET-DOWN STRIKE REPORTED IN FREETOWN 0709 CENTERED AROUND SIX DETAINED NJALA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND PERHAPS ANOTHER 20 STUDENTS ELSEWHERE. AS FAR AS WE CAN DETERMINE ALL STUDENTS HAVE BEEN RELEASED SINCE THE UNIVERSITY AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS HAVE RETURNED TO CLASSES.

4. AS REPORTED FREETOWN 0685, F.S. MUSTAPHA WAS DETAINED. SO WAS F.S. ANTHONY, BUT JUSU SHERRIFF WAS NOT. WE HAVE HEARD, SUBSEQUENT TO FREETOWN A-17, THAT SHERRIFF HAS AGREED NOT TO CHALLENGE MUSTAPHA AS HEAD OF THE SLPP FOR THE UPCOMING ELECTION.

5. ROLE OF ARMY IN CURRENT CRISIS REMAINS ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN POWER EQUATION. FROM WHAT WE KNOW, ARMY IS SITTING OUT THIS CRISIS. THIS IS NOT TO EXCLUDE COUP ATTEMPT. CERTAINLY, SOME HOPE ARMY WILL INTERVENE SINCE THIS IS ONLY WAY STEVENS CAN BE DEPOSED. THERE IS GROWING VIEW THAT, IF ELECTIONS CAUSE WIDESPREAD VIOLENCE OR IF THEY ARE PATENTLY UNFAIR, THE ARMY, PROBABLY JOINED BY POLICE, WILL NOT TOLERATE SITUATION. WHETHER INTERNAL SECURITY UNIT WILL JOIN THEM, SUPPORT STEVENS, OR CHOOSE TO COMBAT A DETERMINED ARMY/POLICE ACTION IS SPECULATIVE.

6. NO EXACT DATE HAS BEEN DETERMINED FOR ELECTIONS. PRIME MINISTER ANNOUNCED ELECTIONS WOULD BE HELD IN APRIL, WITH APRIL 29 DATE MOST WIDELY RUMORED. DATE MAY HAVE SLIPPED BY A WEEK. BESIDES POLITICAL MANEUVERING, TECHNICAL OBSTACLE EXISTS, AS
SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 FREETO 00869 111453Z

SUDDEN DECISION TO CALL ELECTION CAUGHT ELECTORAL COMMISSION UNPREPARED. THE LISTS OF ELIGIBLE VOTERS ARE JUST NOW BEING PREPARED.

7. DISTURBANCES OF FEBRUARY HAVE MOSTLY ENDED THROUGHOUT COUNTRY. ALTHOUGH THEY COULD BEGIN AGAIN, FOCUS NOW IS ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY THE ELECTION. NATIONAL CURFEW WAS ENDED MARCH 9.

8. EFFECT OF ACCIDENT TO VICE PRESIDENT KOROMA AND HIS SUBSEQUENT MEDEVAC TO BONN MAY BE SIGNIFICANT. KOROMA WAS ONLY SENIOR OFFICIAL COMPETENT TO ORGANIZE ELECTION CAMPAIGN. A USUALLY RELIABLE SOURCE SUGGESTS THAT STEVENS DOES NOT EXPECT KOROMA TO RETURN TO SIERRA LEONE BEFORE ELECTIONS AND HAS APPROACHED MOHAMMED BASH-TAQI TO REJOIN APC AND ORGANIZE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN. BASH-TAQI RESIGNED FROM STEVENS' CABINET IN 1970 TO HELP FORM NADP. HE WAS DETAINED AFTER JULY 1974 COUP ATTEMPT, BUT WAS NOT EXECUTED LIKE HIS BROTHER, IBRAHIM TAQI. BASH-TAQI VIEWED AS GOOD ORGANIZER AND PROBABLY LESS VIOLENT THAN KOROMA.

9. EMBASSY HAS MAINTAINED A VERY LOW POSTURE SINCE DISTUR-
BANCES BEGAN. OUR STRONGLY HELD VIEW IS THAT MUCH INFORMATION
WILL REACH US WITHOUT OUR OVERTLY SEEKING IT. CHANCES OF TOO
INTERESTED A SEARCH FOR INFORMATION BEING MISINTERPRETED RAISES
UNNECESSARY RISKS TO TOTAL US INTERESTS HERE.
SAMUELS

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